

Against the Grain

Manuscript 8379

Blurring Lines- Open Educational Resources: The Rise of the Library and Navigating the “Spectrum of Affordability”

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Blurring Lines — Open Educational Resources: The Rise of the Library and Navigating the “Spectrum of Affordability”

An Interview with Steven J. Bell, Associate University Librarian for Research and Instructional Services, Temple University

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In early 2014, I penned an article for *Against the Grain* detailing three reasons why I believed the university library should become the hub of access to course materials. The second and third reasons I developed, (the digital nature of content and the value of the data produced by “clicks and views” of that digital content) strike me in hindsight as good reasons for the institution writ large to manage access to learning content rather than the library specifically. But the first reason I detailed, “...course content should be ... included in student tuition...” is more relevant today as faculty seek, increasingly, to leverage library-licensed content alongside open educational resources (OERs) and traditional text and learning content from big publishers like **Pearson, Wiley, McGraw Hill** and others. The university library and the growing cadre of OER librarians and instructional design librarians are exceptionally well-situated to be the hub of access to course content, faculty support in the discovery of needed content and also for the delivery of tools and platforms capable of aligning to, or replacing, current learning management systems, online homework products and other supporting frameworks for online education, such as on-demand tutoring services.

These are bold assertions, I know; however, my interaction with the OER community and attendance at conferences supporting the OER community, and OER librarians specifically, indicate what was in the period up to 2010 a nascent movement is now fully flourishing. With the foregoing in mind, I sought out **Steven Bell** from **Temple University** to offer his views on the evolution of the library as a center in support of faculty and course development. **Steven** has been active in the OER community, instructional design and course development for many years and has led in advocacy for **Temple** faculty and the wide community of faculty and librarians embracing OER.

Steven J. Bell is the Associate University Librarian for Research and Instructional Services at **Temple University Libraries**. Our interview follows.

Steven, please describe how you first became involved in supporting open educational resources (OER).

SB: In my original work portfolio, I was responsible for scholarly communications. It was frustrating to make the case for open access to faculty in a traditional “publish or

perish” promotion system that worked against openness. In 2009 I heard **Nicole Allen** deliver a passionate presentation about the textbook crisis. It resonated with me and suggested a potential path to connecting with faculty on issues of openness in higher education. At the time, OER options were limited, but there were other ways to engage faculty with affordable learning content options, such as licensed library content. It presented a unique opportunity to encourage faculty to better leverage licensed resources as instructional content when OER was unavailable or in need of supporting material. To incentivize faculty to commit to eliminating their traditional commercial textbook, I convinced our Library Dean to create a pool of \$10,000 to provide stipends to “ditch the textbook.” We launched this in 2011 and easily found takers for our first ten awards. Since then we’ve saved our students well over a million dollars in textbook costs, improved their learning and supported faculty whose mission is making higher education more affordable. (Find a more detailed version in the article “Spreading the Word, Building a Community: Vision for a National Librarian OER Movement,” **N. Allen, S. Bell, M. Billings, Against the Grain**, v.26#5, Nov. 2014.) Since then I’ve published and presented on OER, collaborated with **Nicole Allen** and **Marilyn Billings** to start SPARC’s LibOER discussion list and more recently am working with state colleagues to develop Affordable Learning Pennsylvania.

Describe your personal perspective on the role of the library in providing content and services to support research versus course assigned content.

SB: They’re both essential to the success of a contemporary research library, but I perceive the former as a passive, reactive practice while the latter promotes active, collaborative relationship building. Our role in supporting course assigned content creates new opportunities for academic librarians as contributors to student success. According to past **Ithaca S&R** faculty surveys (see <https://sr.ithaca.org/people/alisa-b-rod/>), with respect to research support, the library is first and foremost, from the faculty perspective, a content provider rather than a partner for success. They may have little concern for cost or process, but faculty expect librarians to provide their research content. As we shift priorities to support student academic success, I envision fewer faculty seeking librarian collaboration for one-on-one

research support. Delivering course assigned content requires academic librarians to deeply engage with faculty in identifying and providing access to instructional resources. Recently, at my institution’s teaching and learning conference, I presented with a faculty member who participated in our textbook affordability project. It’s highly unlikely this faculty colleague would ask me for research assistance, but I was gratified to hear heaps of praise for the library’s support — and our partnership — in identifying course assigned content that allowed this faculty member to eliminate a \$150 textbook. In a survey this faculty member conducted across all the sections they teach, 50% of the students reported not purchasing this expensive textbook. Moving to OER and supplemental content made a significant difference for the students. That’s the exact kind of engagement and success story we need to demonstrate our value to the academic enterprise.

Have you dedicated specific staff to OER? Added an OER Librarian position?

SB: At **Temple University Libraries** we are unlikely to add a dedicated OER Librarian position. I do see the value it brings to a textbook affordability initiative. The institutions that add this position are doing great work, especially in OER production. Given our need for other critical staff positions, it’s a luxury we can’t afford. In 2011, I was the sole library staff member leading our textbook initiative. Fortunately, we added **Annie Johnson** as our Library Publishing and Scholarly Communications Specialist in 2016. That’s close to, but not quite, a dedicated staff member for OER. **Annie** has done an amazing job promoting OER, expanding the scope of our project and engaging more librarians in our initiatives. For example, as a connector between the library and university press, **Annie** led the creation of a new imprint, **North Broad Press**, that is dedicated to publishing open textbooks. Though we have no OER Librarian, we have made great progress engaging our subject specialist liaison librarians in advancing our OER work, and their involvement is tremendously valued. I’d pose it as a tradeoff. With an OER Librarian you have a staff member who can dedicate their full time to the OER initiative, but it’s a new position that takes time to build a network and earn faculty trust. It may even lead liaison librarians to expect the OER Librarian to bear the full burden of creating a successful OER program. Our liaisons devote far less time to

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OER but when they are engaged with the initiative they bring their already developed, trusted faculty network to any textbook affordability related activity. In the end, whichever works best for your organization to get the desired outcome is a win for the library, faculty and students.

In terms of a “spectrum of affordability” perspective, describe how you approach advocating for/promoting OER, library-licensed content and inclusive-access programs.

SB: I like the phrase “spectrum of affordability” because it reflects the lack of a single best solution or option for textbook affordability. As an OER advocate, I would always encourage faculty to adopt an OER textbook or other open learning content for their course — and to explore open education methods to engage students in the creation of their own learning content. We collaborate with faculty to make that possible. That’s hitting one end of the spectrum — true “5R” OER. For some advocates, it’s either OER or go home. I believe academic librarians need more flexibility to identify solutions along the spectrum, being aware of the possible options. That means developing a keen understanding of vendor products touted as “affordable solutions” — and being able to explain the spectrum of options to faculty colleagues. We are far less likely to advocate for inclusive-access options because they are among the least student-friendly options along the affordability spectrum. The changing narrative in OER advocacy is that there is more to changing the instructional materials ecosystem than economics alone. Affordable solutions are desirable, but less so if students are denied long-term access to learning content, if their re-sell or content sharing rights are restricted or their private data is being collected for marketing. That establishes OER as the best option, but until there is robust open content across all disciplines, librarians must be well-informed and creative in steering faculty to affordable solutions along the spectrum.

SB: Your question reflects the current state of the ecosystem. Not only is the open educational content far from 100% of what’s needed, we have what I’ll refer to as the “package” conundrum. By that I mean we are often able to point faculty to an open textbook that is ideal for their course, but it lacks those ancillary materials (e.g., homework problems, test banks, instructional video, etc.) that faculty have come to depend on thanks to publishers integrating them into the textbooks. The need to append OER with this ancillary content is now well recognized in the community. The recent federal government Open Textbooks Pilot Program grant of \$5 million awarded to **LibreText** is going to allow more development of these materials, but we are in catch-up mode and will be for the next few years. If the choice is between students paying \$100 or more for commercial textbooks or \$35 for an inclusive-access textbook with limited rights or licensed-library content at no cost to the student, we need to do what’s in the best interest of our students’ affordable learning. That said, I do not support academic libraries buying expensive print textbooks and putting them on reserve. To my way of thinking, that sends the wrong message to faculty because we are subsidizing their choice of expensive textbooks, rather than creating awareness that affordable solutions are the better option — not to mention that print textbooks on reserve is an inadequate solution for many students who are not dedicated library users, are mainly off campus or are hampered by a host of other barriers.

What are your favorite resources for searching and finding OER content? And what are the greatest challenges you face using these resources?

SB: It may not be the answer you were anticipating, but I would tell an instructor that the best resource to search and find OER content is their academic department’s subject specialist librarian. We are supporting our liaison librarians to develop OER expertise in their disciplines. I do have my favorites. My go to is the **Open Textbook Library**. The content is growing — it now lists over 600 open textbooks. It’s easy to use, I know the books are vetted for ease of downloading and accessibility features. I’ve been experimenting with the search engines, OASIS and OER Metafinder. Depending on the topic, the results work well. There are still too many possibilities and too little consolidation. The OER resource page I maintain lists nearly 30 different sites holding OER and there are even more than that. The greatest challenge is when there’s no obvious OER for the course. Then it requires detailed searching, identifying potential licensed library

content to supplement OER and in some cases I might even recommend taking advantage of fair use to provide a scanned book chapter. That’s why the best bet is a skilled resource expert who knows what to search, how to find it and what to do to go beyond the basics. What’s likely less obvious to non-librarians are the two primary discussion lists for librarians with OER questions, the OTN discussion list

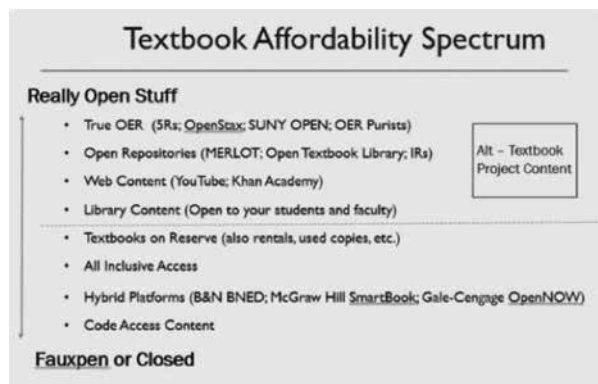
(membership required) and the **SPARC LibOER** discussion list (open to all). It has become a daily routine on these lists for a librarian to seek assistance in locating OER for a course. As is often the case in our profession, you need to leverage the network. I also gravitate to the lists because they are the first place where librarians and others are sharing the newest

OER publications. That allows us to be proactive in letting faculty in that subject area know there’s a great new OER book that they may want to adopt.

The recent Babson “Freeing the Textbook” survey points to rapidly increasing faculty awareness and adoption of OER. How pervasive do you think OER + library-licensed course content will be across your institution in 10 years?

SB: It was encouraging to see an increase in the number of faculty reporting awareness or adoption of OER. The *Babson Reports* indicate a trend where more faculty are migrating to OER each year. I do question how accurate the data is owing to one personal observation. In 2018 I authored a report for *Choice*, “Course Materials Adoption,” (see http://www.choice360.org/content/2-librarianship/5-whitepaper/bell-white-paper-october-2018/100318_bell_white_paper.pdf) based on a survey of over 1,000 faculty. They were asked a series of questions about how they learn about instructional materials and how they make their adoption decisions. When I drilled down into the individual responses to questions about OER adoption, it was clear that faculty, or at least these respondents, were confused or simply unaware of what constitutes OER. When reporting what they chose it was a mix of free web content, library licensed content and OER. I believe too many faculty still conflate all “free” content and identify it as OER. It’s quite possible that the faculty who responded to the latest Babson survey clearly understand that OER is free AND licensed with the permissions to freely use it in all of the ways that are allowed on the Internet. So reuse, revise, remix, redistribute and retain. I’m doubtful that’s the case. If OER and student-friendly affordable options have any chance to become pervasive in the next ten years, then academic librarians must do a better job of creating OER awareness at their institutions. But we can’t do it alone. Increasingly we are creating campus coalitions that bring together faculty, students, librarians, bookstore personnel,

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What is your view on the ecosystem argument in the OER space, i.e., 100% of the needed content and solutions cannot be made freely available and thus the goal is to lower per student cost rather than eliminate all student cost.

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sale. The outcome desired was an authorized order form. We used to say "we pay commission on signed orders, not mind orders." A simple way for the buyer to understand the items contained in that legal mumbo jumbo is to ask the seller, "Can you tell me what the contract says?" Once again, the buyer is asking the seller for assistance in understanding the elements of the order form. Understanding the legalese as explained by the seller allows both parties to know what the expected outcome is for the seller.

Sometimes in a negotiation, the buyer and seller simply cannot agree on a certain item. Although the mantra I have used (which was suggested to me by one of my favorite Product Managers many years ago) was "The customer is always right; and if they are wrong, our job is to make them right." However, sometimes an item on the agenda just cannot seem to be resolved. If that is the case, then acknowledge that fact and try to move on and collectively figure out an alternative.

The buying and selling process involves working together, helping each other and knowing one another. I am a proponent of

strengthening the relationship between buyer and seller.

In closing, the song that best exemplifies this process is "Help!" by the Beatles. "Help, I need somebody, Help, not just anybody, Help you know I need someone, Help!" 🌿

Mike is currently the Managing Partner of Gruenberg Consulting, LLC, a firm he founded in January 2012 after a successful career as a senior sales executive in the information industry. His firm is devoted to provide clients with sales staff analysis, market research, executive coaching, trade show preparedness, product placement and best practices advice for improving negotiation skills for librarians and salespeople. His book, "Buying and Selling Information: A Guide for Information Professionals and Salespeople to Build Mutual Success" has become the definitive book on negotiation skills and is available on Amazon, Information Today in print and eBook, Amazon Kindle, B&N Nook, Kobo, Apple iBooks, OverDrive, 3M Cloud Library, Gale (GVRL), MyiLibrary, ebrary, EBSCO, Blio, and Chegg. www.gruenbergconsulting.com

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teaching and learning center colleagues and others to develop campus-wide strategies for textbook affordability. Over the next few years I believe we'll see more states passing textbook affordability legislation or funding efforts to create OER, in addition to federal programs. I mentioned my current involvement in launching a statewide textbook affordability initiative in my state that seeks to involve and support every academic institution to promote OER adoption. We are joining other states in taking this "go further together" approach to making textbook affordability a highly visible education issue. With all these efforts now in motion I see us achieving a critical mass in the next five years that will position OER and library-licensed content as the primary content delivery system for student learning. If it takes ten years we are doing something wrong. The one unknown factor that's difficult to account for is what actions textbook publishers will take during this period to maintain their market for learning platforms and content delivery. If the past year is an indicator they will seek to evolve their own affordable options, but perhaps we can learn to work in unison to do what's best for students and the future of affordable higher education. 🌿